

THE MASTERY OF FEAR

*Humanity's Inherited Dreads Can Be Largely Eliminated
by Preserving the Health and Properly Directing Infants*

By **JOSIAH MORSE, Ph.D.**

Drawing by Joseph Clement Coll

MR. KIPLING, who is an excellent observer of human nature, says in "The Light That Failed," "To each man is appointed his particular dread—the terror that, if he does not fight against it, must cow him even to the loss of his manhood. . . . As the Nilghai quaked against his will at the still green water of a lake or a mill dam, as Torpenhow flinched before any white arm that could cut or stab, and loathed himself for flinching, Dick feared the poverty he had once tasted half in jest. His burden was heavier than the burdens of his companions."

That fear if unfought can debase us to cowards and poltroons, so that we despise ourselves and hide our faces from the sight of men, is an assertion almost as universally true as an axiom in geometry; but how successfully to fight the fears that assail us is the practical question which is answered too seldom. And for sufficient good reason too; for the subject is extremely complicated, involving factors of various orders. In the first place, it is necessary to know to what type the particular fear that is to be combatted belongs, since there are wide differences in the nature of fears. The Nilghai's fear of the "still green water of a lake or a mill dam," for example, belongs to the instinctive type of fears, as do the fear of looking up as well as down a precipice, the fear of blood, loud sounds, bright lights, etc., for which we can give no adequate reason. They are not fears due to some previous painful experience in our lives, nor are they fears of impending danger. The new born infant is afraid of falling, not because it has experienced that falling is painful, but because of a deep seated instinct which is older by countless ages than personal experience.

Odors Made Them Afraid

THESE fears are just as unaccountable as some of our particular tastes and distastes, and may be compared to them. Rousseau states that the smell of soup always made his mistress, Madame de Warens, ill. Erasmus could not smell fish or duck's meat without having fever. Favoriti, an Italian poet, could not endure the odor of a rose. The sight of milk and cheese would cause Pierre d'Apono, a distinguished physician, to swoon; and so the list might be multiplied almost infinitely. If we ask such persons among our friends why they dislike oranges, or bananas, or tomatoes, or melons, they either cannot tell us, or they will fall back on the adage, "There is no accounting for taste." So too there is no satisfactory explanation for instinctive fears, despite the efforts of learned professors to find such.

Each individual carries within his blood, his nervous system, and the very marrow of his bones the little peculiarities, not only of his parents, but of his ancestors for untold generations back,—back through the human race, the lower animals, the fishes, to the one-cell animals perhaps, which can be seen only with the aid of a microscope. And these peculiarities have in the course of time combined and blended in a million different ways, giving rise to a laughable twist here, an absurd turn there; to a weakness which is incongruous with the rest of our make up, or to a strength in some direction which is surprising even to ourselves. One combination makes a genius; another, infinitesimally different, makes a fool. As Browning has well said:

Oh, the little more, and how much it is!
And the little less, and what worlds away!

These Fears Are Legitimate

VERY different is the type to which Torpenhow's fear of "any white arm that could cut or stab" belongs. This fear, like the fear of a gun, a wild animal, a robber, fire, or anything dangerous, is reasonable and legitimate. It grows out of our every day experiences, and is very useful to us; for without

the capacity to fear objects and beings which are really dangerous we should not be long able to survive. However, the degree of probability of being hurt or injured must be taken into consideration. To be afraid in the presence of a real or impending danger is natural and normal; but to go about with a fear of an improbable danger, such as being bitten by a dog, or run over while crossing a street, or contracting a disease in a street car, is morbid. These things are possible, of course, but very improbable, and the mental anguish that is suffered on account of them is altogether out of proportion to the amount of real danger. Healthy minded people attend to their daily affairs without occupying themselves with such fears.

Still another type of fear is that to which Dick's fear of poverty belongs; namely, intellectual fears. These fears are provoked not by some dangerous object, but by a painful idea of some sort. When we undertake a new business or enter any new field of activity, we are tormented more or less with the fear that we shall make some blunder and be unable to succeed. Some eminently successful men have been fairly obsessed with the fear of failure and the disgrace that would follow it. Others, of a hypersensitive nature, have a morbid fear of ridicule or of shame. Rousseau, for example, speaking in his "Confessions" of his baseness in accusing a servant girl of a petty theft he himself had committed, says, "I did not fear punishment; but I dreaded shame. I dreaded it more than death, more than the crime, more than all the world. I would have buried, hid myself, in the center of the earth; invincible shame bore down every other sentiment,—shame alone caused all my impudence,—and in proportion as I became criminal, the fear of discovery rendered me intrepid. I felt no dread but that of being detected, of being publicly and to my face declared a thief, liar, and calumniator. An unconquerable fear of this overcame every other sensation. Had I been left to myself, I should infallibly have declared the truth."

Notebooks Their Safeguard

SOME are constantly afraid that they have forgotten something they should remember, and consequently carry with them a notebook or scraps of paper on which they write down everything that happens, and when and where. Some are tormented with the fear that they are becoming insane, and others are assailed with moral and religious fears. Professor Bérard relates the case of a priest who, when he had to counsel his penitents at confession, grew pale, shuddered, and worried himself frightfully at the idea of his responsibility. Conscientious teachers, preachers, and judges have experienced similar feelings.

Having shown thus briefly that not all fears are alike, either in origin or in their nature, but that there are well defined types among them, we may now attempt to suggest means of overcoming them. The worst of all cases are those of instinctive fears; for they are the most deeply rooted and so very far removed from reason. One can no more be argued

out of them or argue himself out of them than he can change the color of his eyes or increase his stature by such means. They are products of heredity (the true meaning of which is still a mystery to science). That they are not wholly incurable, however, is shown by the case of Goethe, who overcame his instinctive fear of loud noises and high places by compelling himself to listen to a multitude of drums, "the powerful rolling and beating of which might have made one's heart burst in one's bosom," and by ascending the highest pinnacle of the church spire and standing there on a very narrow platform.

Goethe's Strenuous Remedy

SUCH troublesome and painful sensations I repeated," he writes, "until the impression became quite indifferent to me; and I have since then derived great advantage from this training, in mountain travels and geological studies, and on great buildings, where I have vied with the carpenters in running over the bare beams and the cornices of the edifice, and even in Rome, where one must run similar risks to obtain a nearer view of important works of art. . . . But I endeavored to harden myself, not only against these impressions on the senses, but also against the infections of the imagination.

"The awful and shuddering impressions of the darkness in churchyards, solitary places, churches, and chapels by night, and whatever may be connected with them, I contrived to render likewise indifferent; and in this also I went so far that day and night, and every locality, were quite the same to me; so that even when, in later times, a desire came over me once more to feel in such scenes the pleasing shudder of youth, I could hardly compel this, in any degree, by calling up the strangest and most fearful images."

His fear of disease and corpses he overcame by attending clinics and doing dissecting work. Professors in medical colleges witness every year the painful and heroic struggles of freshmen to conquer similar fears.

A Western physician, finding that his morbid fear of cats seriously interfered with his success in his profession, resorted to desperate means to overcome it. He had himself bound in his room, and ordered a cat to be brought in. He endured its presence for half an hour the first day, and every day thereafter subjected himself to the same treatment, increasing the length of time and permitting the cat to come closer and closer to him. Finally, at the end of about six months of truly heroic treatment, he was cured of his fear, being able even to pat the cat on the back, although it still required an effort of the will to do so.

A young woman who had a horror of touching water, compelled herself to plunge in, and afterward developed a great love for it.

Make Up Your Mind to Conquer It

THERE is hardly a fear which will not yield, once we have firmly made up our minds to conquer it at any cost; but this in itself requires patience, persistence, and a strength of will which not very many possess. A college professor confesses that he cannot pass at night a country graveyard, familiar in his boyhood, without experiencing the old panic. He has often tried to force himself to go through it; but desisted because "it would use up too much energy more useful in other ways."

How energy can be used more advantageously than in conquering a fear which belittles us and lowers our self esteem, is difficult to imagine. We are inclined to think that the reason given is only an excuse for the lack of the necessary will power required to enter the graveyard and once for all dispel the superstitious fear. There are many persons, we fancy, who give the same excuse for not breaking themselves of bad habits. The same qualities of mind and will are necessary for over-